

Knowledge as the Real Essence

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Islam regards the seeking of knowledge as an ethical imperative, and an endeavour highly pleasing to God. Amongst the sources of knowledge, the Qur'an particularly emphasises the following revelation and practice of the Holy Prophet (pbuh); reason; empirical inquiry; history and intuition.

From the Qur'anic perspective, knowledge is not limited to what is learnt through a reasoning mind or the senses. Acquisition of knowledge requires a total involvement of the seeker in relation to the total reality. To become a "total" or a "whole" person, integration of the diverse, often mutually conflicting, aspects of one's outer and inner self is required, as sages through the centuries have taught.

By identifying and endorsing the diverse sources of knowledge often considered to be mutually opposing (as revelation and reason, or reason and intuition), the Qur'an points to both the possibility of, and the need for, an integration or synthesis leading to a unity of knowledge that subsumes the multiplicity of the sources of knowledge. That the Qur'anic vision had been internalised by Allama Iqbal, for instance, is clear from his statement "Modern India ought to focus on the discovery of man as a personality - as an independent "whole" in an all-embracing synthesis of life. But does our education today tend to awaken in us such a sense of inner wholeness? My answer is 'No'. ... The soul of man is left untouched and the result is a superficial knowledge with a mere illusion of culture and freedom. Amidst this predominantly intellectual culture which must accentuate separate centres within the 'whole', the duty of higher minds ... is to reveal the inner synthesis of life."

The Qur'an urges the seeking of knowledge so that through it both inner and outer reality may be transformed. It is in the essence of a river to flow and the sun to give light. Likewise, it is in the essence of an "*alim*" (scholar) to translate knowledge into objective reality as did the Prophet of Islam (pbuh). The Qur'an calls those who know but do not act "*jahilun*" (ignorant ones). Understood in these terms, an "*alim*" is one who strives in the way of God.

The high rate of illiteracy amongst Muslims, especially women, is both a tragedy and irony, given the importance accorded to acquisition of knowledge by Islam. The Qur'an refers more than one hundred times to God as "*Alim*" (he who knows), and the very first verse revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) links to divine bounty the human ability to write and to know (Surah 96:1).

The Qur'an describes the Prophet of Islam as one taught by God (Surah 4:113) and as an imparter of knowledge to others (Surah 2:151) but commands him, nevertheless, to pray "O my Sustainer, cause me to grow in knowledge" (Surah 20:114). About those who have knowledge, the Qur'an says that they have been given great wealth (Surah 2:269), and will be exalted by God (Surah 58:11).

The Qur'anic perspective is also reflected in a number of well-known ahadith. For instance "The seeking of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Baihaqi, *Mishkat*); "Search for knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim, male and female (Ibn Majah); "He who goes forth in search of knowledge is in the way of Allah till he returns" (Tirmidhi, Darimi); "Search for knowledge though it be in China (Baihaqi); "Whoever searches after knowledge, it will be expiation for his past sins." (Tirmidhi)

The high priority given to his community's education by the Prophet (pbuh) is attested by Goldiher thus "That Muhammad (pbuh) himself - partly, it may be, on utilitarian grounds - attached considerable importance to the acquisition of the most indispensable elements of knowledge, may be inferred from the conditions on which he released prisoners of war after his victory at Badr. He employed several Quraish captives to teach the boys of Medina to write, and this service counted as their ransom."

The Prophet's (pbuh) attitude had a strong impact on his community as pointed out by Semaan "In the realm of education, we may say, Muhammad (pbuh) instituted learning as an incumbent duty upon his people and this established a definite educational policy for Islam."

Gulick expresses the belief that the knowledge affirming ahadith which "have been widely accepted as authentic and ... have exerted a wide and salutary influence ... must assuredly have stimulated and encouraged the great thinkers of the golden age of Islamic civilisation."

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